A Pivotal Year

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Speaking to the House of Commons in December 1917, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George made a prescient statement: “When the history of 1917 comes to be written ... these events in Mesopotamia and Palestine will hold a much more conspicuous place in the minds and in the memories of the people than many an event which looms much larger for the moment in our sight.”

Observers in Westminster might have been forgiven for scoffing at Lloyd George. After all, the momentous year of 1917 had already witnessed not one, but two astonishing revolutions in Russia; entry of the United States into the Great War; and two disastrous Allied offensives on the Western Front, one by the French on the Chemin des Dames and the other by the British in Flanders. By comparison, events in dusty, distant backwaters like Palestine and Mesopotamia must have seemed insignificant, if not completely irrelevant. And yet here we are in 2017. Once infamous places in Western Europe like Passchendaele, Craonne, and Zeebrugge have long receded from importance—except to those on battlefield pilgrimages and tourists looking to catch a faded glimpse of the past. True to Lloyd George’s prophecy, by contrast, Mesopotamia (now Iraq) and Palestine (now Israel) became, and remain, centers of contemporary global conflict and focal points of international politics.

Much else has happened in the intervening century that can help account for the persistence of these two conflicts, of course. Even so, the modern roots of each date to 1917, when the British Empire supplanted the centuries-old Ottoman Empire in a development that was as shocking as it was unpredictable when seen from the perspective of 1914. In a very real sense, we remain trapped in a kind of War of the Ottoman Succession, as the world continues to struggle to find a way to govern the Middle East after the collapse of the Ottomans.

David Stevenson’s sweeping and powerful history, “1917: War, Peace, and Revolution,” takes its lead from Lloyd George (although the quotation above does not appear until page 360). Well-known, major events that took place outside Ottoman domains, like the Third Battle of Ypres (also sometimes misleadingly called Passchendaele), the two Russian Revolutions, and American entry into the war, all form the bases of chapters, as they
should in a book about 1917 as a whole. They are skillfully presented. The real value of this book, however, lies in its analyses of the impact of the Great War on places that in 1917 seemed far less important than the fighting in Europe. They include Palestine and Mesopotamia, but also places as diverse as China, India, Greece, and Brazil.

Stevenson is an experienced and talented historian of World War I who knows that as much as the non-European parts of his study today seem most interesting, in January 1917, serious strategists still had their eyes fixed firmly on Europe and the Western Front. It was, they thought, in the trenches of France and Belgium that the war would ultimately be won or lost. As events themselves later proved, defeat on the Western Front did in fact lead to the nullification of the German gains in the east that followed from Russia’s exit from the war. Although it was, in its impact, a global war, the conflict’s center of gravity remained confined to a small, seemingly immovable line of trenches from the North Sea to the Swiss border.

Most senior leaders of the warring parties by 1917 understood full well the enormous costs of the war to date and those that might (indeed, almost certainly would) continue to accrue. They knew by then that even if their side somehow “won,” victory would not bring gains worth even a fraction of those human and social costs. Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, Britain’s senior military commander, was very far outside the general consensus of British public opinion when he estimated that the loss of one in ten British young men in uniform was not too steep a price to pay for victory. His opposite numbers in the German high command generally agreed with his estimate of acceptable sacrifice with respect to their own side. It was, tragically, the measure of acceptable losses, even if no one in either those military headquarters could even begin to express or explain adequately to their societies what, exactly, their side’s own war aims were. Almost everyone else comprehended, however, that peace, however desirable, was not sufficient on its own to address the problem of justifying the human and social costs of the conflict.

As 1917 began, Stevenson argues, two fundamental problems hampered efforts at peace, despite the mounting, increasingly visible costs of the conflict and the evident war-weariness of Europe. First, the warring parties fell victim to what we would today call the sunk costs of war. Having spent so much money, risked and lost so many lives, and gambled their futures so recklessly, the belligerents could not accept a compromise peace that simply adjusted borders or resolved some minor colonial claim as had happened during minor diplomatic crises in 1898, 1905, and 1911. Too much blood had been spilled to return to the status quo ante or accept a scheme like Woodrow Wilson’s of peace without victory. Simply put, having taken their peoples into such a destructive war, the leaders of Europe had too much to answer for to their own people to end the war by compromise.

Second, none of the potential peacemakers came with completely disinterested hands. Wilson sought a particular kind of peace, one in line with his Fourteen Points, but equally one that satisfied neither the Allies nor the Germans (although the latter eventually turned to it in November 1918 as a way of protecting themselves from the vengeance of the British and French). The new Austrian emperor, Karl, showed a willingness to negotiate that has earned him the admiration of some scholars; but he, too, had an agenda—namely the preservation or even expansion of his empire’s territory. Other peace brokers like the Vatican, the international socialist parties who tried to convene a peace conference in Stockholm, and, of course, the Bolsheviks, advanced their own goals.

The ideology or desiderata of any one of these actors inevitably came up against the minimum requirements of at least one other actor; any acceptable overall
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settlement faced rejection by a party necessary to that settlement. Even Germany’s negotiations with the Russian revolutionaries at Brest-Litovsk had to take into account the needs and interests of their Austro-Hungarian allies. In short, in this total war, there were precious few points of potential compromise and almost no trust between enemies or even among allies possessing sharply divergent postwar goals. Thus the war would not end with compromise, but only through one side’s complete defeat of the other; in other words, this tragic conflict would continue if for no other reason than faut de mieux.

But on the field of battle itself in the entrenched positions of the Western Front, the fundamental problems of static warfare remained. In Clausewitzian terms, the submarine, the airplane, and the tank had changed the character of the war but not its fundamental nature. On the larger political level, American entry and Russian collapse increased the pressure on both sides, as all warring powers tried to win the war before the Americans could step in and claim the right to set peace terms themselves. Moreover, French, German, Italian, and Austro-Hungarian leaders all expressed a fear that their peoples might do what the Russians had done: turn on their leaders.

Thus the Allies launched two terribly planned and executed offensives in 1917. The first, a mainly French operation on the Chemin des Dames supported by British and Canadian operations around Arras and Vimy Ridge in April, led to mutinies in the French army. It ushered in a new military leadership that sought, as Gen. Henri Philippe Pétain famously put it, to wait for tanks and the Americans. The British failed just as terribly in their slogging autumn attempt to break out of the Ypres salient and achieve the strategic goal of clearing the U-Boat pens on the Belgian coast in Ostend and Zeebrugge. These massive twin failures laid the groundwork both for the German offensives of spring 1918 and the decisive American effort that summer and fall.

This part of the story is relatively well known, and Stevenson effectively places these events in the larger international political context, in two sections of the book: “Atlantic Prologue,” which covers the German use of submarines and the resulting American entry into the war, and “Continental Impasse,” which covers the two failed Allied offensives.

Of greatest contemporary interest, however, is the book’s third section, “Global Repercussions,” which, as the name suggests, reaches far and wide, including the Ottoman lands. In Stevenson’s telling, Lloyd George’s prediction emerged from the failure of other options for achieving victory in the war. In 1917, he was trying to sell Parliament and the British people on a new strategy: drive the Ottomans out of the war, while delivering key pieces of their former territories into British hands and sparing Britain any more bloodbaths like the Somme and Third Ypres. It would have global impact.

Beyond wartime strategy, Lloyd George further hoped that the addition of Palestine and the oil fields of Mesopotamia to the British zone of influence (if not directly to the empire itself) in the postwar international settlement would help answer the question of what Britain might gain to make good its enormous sacrifices. Whether a family in Liverpool or Dublin would see control of Basra as worthy of their son’s death seems an open question, but it is equally true that no one else had yet come up with a much better answer.

British attempts to reorient the Middle East to their control faced opposition from the French and the Russians. But here there was room for compromise with each of them—in the form of the Sykes-Picot Agreement that gave France control over much of what we today call Lebanon and Syria. As to Russia, backroom deals promised the (still-ruling) czar control of Constantinople and the Dardanelles. The British also cut mutually contradictory deals with the Zionists (in the form of the Balfour Declaration) and the Arabs, to
whom they promised support for a grand, if ill-defined, postwar Arab state under British guidance.

Stevenson reads these promises as functions not of British strength, but of British weakness. Having showed their military limits at Third Ypres, and with neither the Americans nor, by then, the new Bolshevik government in Russia in agreement with their imperial aims, the British saw little choice but to appeal directly to public opinion. They put too much faith, however, in the power of a monolithic “world Jewry” as well as the ability of the Hashemites to command Arab allegiance.

This leads Stevenson to India—by far the most interesting chapter of the book—which had provided enormous support to the British war effort despite the human and economic costs that came with it. With that support came a push for reform of the way that Britain governed the Raj, perhaps even leading to India attaining full Commonwealth status. Similar debates about London repaying the loyalty of the empire’s (white) subjects took place from Canada to South Africa to New Zealand, but nowhere else did they have the racial undertones or economic impact that they would have in regards to India.

No matter how much India gave to the war effort, few British officials could envision a more independent government or one run with more Indian input—though promises along those lines might help to win the war. The racism and paternalism of British leaders always got in the way of more sensible approaches. As a result, Britain’s wartime India policy only made the empire’s governance problems worse. India continued to support the war at astonishing levels, but discontent seethed both on the surface and below it. Muslim-Hindu tension also rose, as the British policy generally favored the former. The combination made conflict in the 1920s and 1930s all but inevitable.

As Stevenson notes, the war created the conditions for major events like the growth of American power and the Bolshevik Revolution, as well as less visible processes like Indian disenchantment with British rule and a growing sense of Chinese nationalism. Some of these processes might have happened without the war but, even if they had, they would have taken decades to have the impact that the war compressed into a few short years.

Stevenson’s 1917 is a fine book, and one that yields a cautionary tale about the risks of gambling on long-odds, long-run political deals in the interests of short-term military or political advantages in wartime.

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